

## 7. THE SERVANT OF GOD, FRANK DUFF – AS I KNEW HIM



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In so brief a talk it is possible only to pick out a couple of short snapshots of Frank Duff. Other legionaries and priests will have a better knowledge of the man himself, and have a different set of snapshots to offer.

The first time I met Frank Duff I was still at school and had not yet joined as an active member of the Legion of Mary. He was 76 years of age at the time. In appearance he didn't immediately stand out as being anyone special. However, when he came over to us I was struck by the interest he took in the person with whom he was conversing. To my father who was with me at that meeting, though they hadn't met for about 20 years previously, without any effort Frank Duff took up the threads and asked about a relative by marriage and other people who were mutual acquaintances.

Some years later I had an opportunity to see Frank Duff more often when attending a variety of meetings at the Concilium. The next impression I had of him was of being a man of deep prayer. However interested he was in a human being he was even more deeply interested in the Lord himself. In the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, and especially during the celebration of the Eucharist everything else was excluded for the duration. An abiding memory I have is of him kneeling on the right hand side of the oratory in the Regina Coeli Hostel, completely absorbed.

Another image I have of him was arriving at Mount Sackville Convent for the annual Peregrinatio Pro Christo planning day, armed with a small briefcase from which he took out a foolscap sheet of paper for each of us – filled to capacity with headings pertaining to different parts of the world. The outcome of those planning days decided where teams of legionaries would go during their holidays, providing them with an opportunity to go to another country to give witness to and to offer the Faith. Frank Duff believed in setting ideas to paper and then including everyone in the planning process thereby allowing the Holy Spirit to have his say. He was a great believer too in the ripple effect: one person speaking to a second, the second speaking to a third and so on so that in time the ripple becomes a tide, and the tide becomes a torrent.

When the strengths and weaknesses of the Legion in a particular country was under consideration Frank Duff listened attentively to the different aspects, offered suggestions and rarely did a meeting end without agreement as to what the next steps would be.

This attention to detail was no less the case when it came to planning his annual cycling holidays in different parts of Ireland: choosing the part of the country to be visited, working out the number of miles between one town and the next to be journeyed each day; checking the bicycles were in full working order; ensuring that the accommodation was suitable for the group – everything was planned meticulously. He had a great love for his country and while on those cycling trips was able to switch off from the day-to-day concerns. In the evenings he regaled the group with stories of the early days of the Legion and the extraordinary people from all walks of life who crossed his path. Those occasions were opportunities to see his great sense of humour and to hear his hearty laughter when reminded of something funny which had occurred.

I recall sitting in the back row of St. Joseph's Hall, Rathmines Road, Dublin when the Concilium meeting was held there in the early 1970s. There must have been a seating capacity of 300 and there wasn't a seat to be had. In the course of one meeting an issue in one of the reports was being teased out, possibly to do with the issue of the right to life. Frank Duff contributed with a short but concise intervention on the most recent medical data on the issue. I remember being fascinated at how well read he was and wondered how, despite his heavy schedule, he managed to keep up to date with medical and scientific advances, areas in which he had a keen interest.

In the work relating to the introduction of his Cause we have had an opportunity to gather together the letters of his which are filed in the Concilium offices, about 33,000 of them. I was one of many who had the privilege of re-typing files of letters across a number of years in order that they would be computerised. I couldn't help but be struck by the picture he painted in the letters of what was going on in the Legion and in the Church at any given time. He freely shared this knowledge with those to whom he was writing both clergy and lay persons. He was frank and open with the views he expressed.

All of what he wrote had at its heart a concern for souls. He considered each soul to be priceless where God was concerned. All of us who knew him would attest to the fact that, as described in Chapter 40 of the Legion Handbook, his desire was that Christ would be brought to everyone. He exhorts in that chapter that everyone be approached "lest the gentle Jesus frown upon us".

In the very many talks he gave during his lifetime, right up to shortly before his death in 1980, a theme he returned to often was that of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He had studied everything written about her that he could get hold of. Not content with that he enriched us in those talks by sharing his knowledge with us, most especially the role she plays in bringing us to her Son. Indeed a couple of his talks on Our Blessed Lady, I believe, give an insight into Our Lady as yet not fully realised by the Church at large. Such was the intimacy, knowledge and love he had of her.

Cardinal Tomás O'Fiach described Frank Duff as the greatest Irishman of the century when speaking at his funeral. I agree that he deserves that accolade because of the graces that were conferred on him to mobilise lay people from all walks of life in all parts of the world, based on a realisation of the consequences when we receive the Sacrament of Baptism.

In those days after his death two aspects struck me: the numbers of ordinary citizens of Dublin and further afield who came to see his mortal remains in the Regina Coeli Hostel oratory, without any formal arrangement being notified; and when we emerged from Westland Row Church to witness the number of people who had gathered along the streets nearby to say their final farewell to this man who was not in the public eye. Many may never have met him personally but recognised him as a good and holy man and that he was.

I owe Frank Duff a great debt of gratitude. He enabled me as a lay person to have the possibility of coming closer to God in a particular way. Through the weekly meeting I was able to learn more about my Faith, about the doctrines of the Church, about the Pope's writings and about many other practical things. Through the organisation he helped to found he gave me as a lay person the possibility of not just thinking about but actually doing something concrete for the Church through the weekly work assignment. Had it not been for him founding the Legion of Mary, I wonder how committed a Catholic I would be, or at the very least, how much less enriched I would be. He held you – the priests – in very high regard, he respected what you stand for and he exhorted us lay people to support and to work with you in every way possible for the greater glory of God and in union with Our Blessed Lady.